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AUTHOR Herrmann, Andrea W.
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ABSTRACT

Gifted students' writing may exhibit stylistic dissonance--a mixture of basic writing features may coexist with features indicative of much higher levels of rhetorical control. A case study of an 11-year-old sixth grade student who attended a freshman composition course at an Arkansas university illustrates this dissonance. The poems and short stories he wrote in sixth grade and during a summer course exhibited many mature features, such as metacognition and revision skills. He was also an excellent peer tutor. His abilities allowed him to take the freshman composition course in which academic writing would be required, even though his elementary school teachers and principal thought he would not succeed because he spoke with a rural accent and came from a low-income family. He was classified as a basic writer in the college setting, because he was unprepared for the types of writing tasks he would encounter. An essay that he wrote revealed many surface errors such as spelling errors, dialect interference, and punctuation problems. Other basic writer's problems he exhibited included egocentrism (or writer based prose) and problems with focus. Yet, his abilities to revise, organize, and add detail to the text attested to his skills as well. It is important for teachers to learn to recognize the gifted child writer, even when surface problems mask their abilities. (The final draft of the essay written by the student and a bibliography are appended.) (SKC)

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The Paradoxes of Stylistic Dissonance: Case Study of A Gifted/Basic Writer

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by Andrea W. Herrmann
Dept. of English
Univ. of Arkansas at Little Rock

The texts of gifted students may reflect diverse levels of literacy. Features usually associated with basic writers may coexist with features indicative of much higher levels of rhetorical control. For example, the writing of gifted students may not comply with the teacher's directions, may lack neatness, and may not conform to the usage, mechanics, and grammar dictates of standard written English. Yet the same texts may reveal sophistication in the use of concrete details, in the articulation of concepts and ideas, and in the implementation of advanced organizational strategies. This mixture of textual features is a phenomenon I refer to as "stylistic dissonance."

Identifying and working with gifted child writers whose writing exhibits stylistic dissonance presents special pedagogical problems. To illustrate this point I present a case study of Phil, an eleven-year old boy who was simultaneously a sixth-grade elementary school pupil and a student in my freshman composition class at the University

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of Arkansas at Little Rock. Phil's situation illuminates the situtation other talented child writers face who fail to fit the usual expectations of gifted children.

Phil was a member of a section of freshman composition consisting of second language speakers--basic writers. While Phil is a native speaker, viewed from certain vantage points, he is a basic writer. Yet by other measures, he is a gifted child writer. I analyze one of his essays, "Our Family's Loss," including his revision strategies, and I discuss the diverse levels of literacy found in his text where features usually associated with basic writers coexist with features indicative of much higher levels of rhetorical complexity.

The story of how this precocious child came into my freshman composition class is relevant. It reveals his high degree of motivation to improve as a writer, his ability to problem solve, and, his talent for eliciting cooperation from the adults around him. In short, it shows his talent for making things happen.

The spring before I had taught an enrichment course in writing using computers to gifted fifth and sixth grade students. Phil was a highly enthusiastic member of the class. His writing was charming and perceptive. His short story, "Space Wars," an imaginative piece of science fiction, was in high demand by his classmates. At the end

of each class, they asked him to print out copies of his latest version so they could read it.

Phil's verbal skills and reasoning abilities appeared to be superior even to the other students in the class. He asked astute questions and his class participation revealed perceptive insights into the poetry and stories we read. He also made effective observations on other student's work, couching his comments in a supportive, nonoffensive manner. He appeared mature beyond his years, an adult housed in a child's body.

When the course was over Phil, whose parents are part-time students at the university, became a regular at the writing center. Using AppleWorks he wrote on the microcomputers throughout the summer. I occasionally saw him there. Phil's "Space Wars" story was turning, he told me, into a novel. He had written three chapters. I asked him to come in and read his story to my class, a graduate course in computers and writing for teachers of the gifted. He did.

After his reading, he discussed his writing process with the graduate students, exhibiting a surprising degree of metacognition and metalinguistic awareness. "Metacognition," according to Flavell as cited by Herriman, is "knowledge or cognition that takes as its object or regulates any aspect of cognititve endeavor" (161). "Metalinguistic awareness," a term used by Courtney Cazden,

refers to the language user's ability to view language as an object in itself (Herriman, 160).

Phil's academic activities that summer were impressive in other ways. In addition to writing with the microcomputers in the Writing Center, he had arranged to get a free account on the campus mainframe computer. Each time he came on campus, he spent time at a terminal in the user room corresponding with students and professors on the system by sending and receiving mail electronically. He began to pick up some programming skills from the students working around him. In addition, he sometimes used the microcomputers in the university's Department of Education to run educational software and copy programs in the public domain.

At the end of the summer Phil told me that he wouldn't have access to computers at his elementary school. I suggested that he come to the Writing Center after school twice a week. I was teaching a freshman composition course and I told him he could use an available microcomputer and I'd help whenever I could. To my amazement, Phil requested permission to take the course for credit. I tried to discourage him. I did not think he could handle it. In the gifted enrichment course we'd written poems and stories, not academic essays. I explained all of this to him. He persisted.

The Director of Freshman Composition and I decided that if Phil could write an essay on the level of the average entering freshman, he would be admitted into the course. Although Phil had never written an essay, he seemed confident he could learn. After a brief discussion about essays with me, he took home a freshman composition textbook to study. A few days later he took the essay test. Although his essay was not without problems, when evaluated holistically, it represented an average level of competence. With the help of others on campus, I was able to secure financial aid to cover Phil's tuition and he enrolled in the course for credit as a special student.

Although Phil is labelled "gifted" by his elementary school and received special pull-out instruction once a week from his class, it became clear that neither his teacher nor his principal considered him particularly gifted. During a phone conversation in which I attempted to secure the principal's permission to release him ten minutes early at the end of school so his father could bring him to the campus, the principal resisted the idea. She didn't feel Phil's ability warranted this special treatment.

In explaining her reluctance, she stressed how poor Phil's family was and the deplorable conditions of his home situation. "They live in the country," she said. "I've been out there. It's really appalling. Four of them live

in this small, filthy trailor. I couldn't get out of my car until they'd called off all their dogs."

His father was unshaven and unemployed, she continued. His mother worked only part-time. The year before the principal and his teacher had donated a suit so Phil could participate in the Christmas play. A while back, the principal had even sent the authorities to his home because of Phil's excessive absences. His school work was often messy and full of careless errors. "He can't even speak English correctly," she said. "He doesn't know his grammar."

Working against Phil's was his--as Arkansans put it--"country talk." He speaks with a rural accent, the type I've heard Arkansans refer to as "uneducated." His speech is liberally peppered with non-standard utterances such as: "We was," "He might could have been," "I done," and so forth. His dialect appears in his writing, too. It became obvious to me that the principal's perceptions of Phil's academic ability centered heavily on his nonstandard dialect and other indications of his family's socio-economic position. Her assessment of his writing ability was limited to observations involving superficial aspects of written text rather than more substantive matters.

In the past, experts in giftedness have often identified children primarily by their level of performance on one or more intelligence tests. The trend today appears

to be moving away from reliance on intelligence tests toward a greater emphasis on other measures, including observations of the child's behavior. John F. Feldhusen and Steven M. Hoover, for example, conceive of giftedness as the interaction of intelligence, special talents or creativity, self concept and motivation. They state:

> Our own view is that giftedness will usually consist of superior general abilities (intelligence)...special focused talents which predispose an individual to high level achievement within one area of human endeavor, and a conception of self which views high level creative achievement or production as attainable, resulting in a motivation to acquire a large knowledge base and to achieve. (14)

Since Phil appears to possess superior general abilities, special talents, a belief in his ability to be successful, and a high degree of personal motivation, he qualifies, according to this definition, as a gifted student. I have found nothing in the literature defining the gifted child writer, although many discussions and definitions of gifted children allude to their creativity and heightened verbal abilities.

On the other hand, much has been written concerning the basic writer, particularly on the college level. McCutchen, Hull, and Smith recently used the term to mean "those students who come to college underprepared for the writing tasks they encounter" (152). Phil, who entered freshman composition with dialect interference in his speaking and writing, who had read little if any academic prose, who had

no experience with academic writing, and who was clearly more comfortable writing in expressive modes rather than in the argument/persuasive mode of academia, could be viewed, at least from these perspectives, as a basic college writer. I viewed Phil as part gifted writer, part basic writer.

I would now like to examine an essay written by Phil during our freshman composition course, particularly the first and last drafts in terms of its stylistic dissonance, that is the mixture of textual features representing the basic writer with those revealing the gifted writer. In particular, I'll discuss some of the rhetorical devices he used during revision to show how he moved beyond basic writing problems into more complicated and sophisticated concerns as he wrote his essay.

The assignment was for the student to write a narrative based on a memorable experience from his or her life. I encouraged students to select an incident they believed mirrored the larger human condition. Using word processing, Phil wrote a narrative essay, "Our Family's Loss." In this essay, he recounted the events surrounding his mother's recent miscarriage. (See Appendix A for the final draft of this essay.)

As we all know, the surface features of a text, particularly when they do not conform to standard written English, leap out at the reader. When excessively deviant from standard English, these surface features are likely to

present red herrings in the teacher's assessment of other, more important, aspects of the writing, since these surface features make it difficult to appreciate textual matters beyond the level of the sentence. Of course, global issues, such as the quality of the ideas, the logic of the organization, the nature of the focus, the balance between abstract and concrete, the coherence and cohesion, and so forth, ultimately distinguish the superiority of one piece of writing over another. Nevertheless, lower-level editing matters in the text can have a significant impact on the reader's appreciation and evaluation of it.

Phil's first draft reveals a number of surface-level textual problems. He has spelling errors. He writes "quailtly" when he needs "quality," "hospiltal" for "hospital," and "recieve" for "receive," among others. He has problems with dialect interference. He writes "we was," "hours after hours," and "to hurry with picking up the pizza." He has problems with commas and other marks of punctuation. Writing research informs us that these surface-level, editing problems are to be expected in a first draft. I encourage students not to worry about such problems while drafting. I tell them not to slow down the flow of their ideas to correct such matters, but to discover what they want to say before worrying about how they want to say it. I tell them that they can clean up these problems in later drafts.

It is important to go beneath the surface problems of a text and look at larger rhetorical concerns, matters beyond the sentence, including observations of the writer at work, in order to get a more complete view of the writer's strategies and skill.

From the first essay of the semester, where Phil made extensive revisions, his work showed evidence that he understood a good deal about revising. For the essay, "Our Family's Loss," he initially wrote five drafts, although only three were required, and he received feedback between revisions from his peer group and/or from me. Since he chose this essay to revise for his final project in the course, he did a sixth draft. At the very end of the semester, he decided to enter this essay into a contest, and he edited it a seventh time. Extensive revising does not usually bring to mind the basic writer. Yet Phil's texts also exhibited rhetorical problems associated with basic writers.

One of the basic writer's problems, according to Mina Shaunessey, is egocentricism. She states that

> we see many evidences in BW papers of the egocentricity of the apprentice writer, an orientation that is reflected in the assumption that the reader understands what is going on in the writer's mind and needs therefore no introductions or transitions or explanations. (240)

Linda S. Flower and John R. Hayes refer to a similar phenomenon as "writer-based prose." They suggest that writer-based prose

> is often the natural result of generating ideas: it borrows its structure from either the writer's own discovery process or from a structure inherent in the material the writers examined. (280)

While writer-based prose is a natural way for writers to initially express their thoughts, writers must write with readers in mind, creating "reader-based prose" (280). In other words, novice writers need to learn how to create elaborated texts that include sufficient information and explanations to guide the reader toward the writer's intentions.

A look at the first draft of Phil's essay shows examples of egocentricism or writer-based prose. There are instances where Phil does not make what is in his mind explicit for the reader, where he fails to supply the necessary elaboration for an unambiguous reading.

He states in paragraph 2, for example:

> It was a normal day at school and dad picked me up as usual on Wednesdays. I was late for class and was embarrassed when I walked in the door.

Phil does not make explicit the fact that "school" means "elementary school" and that "class" means "freshman composition class at the university." This omission is certain to present comprehension difficulties for the reader

who does not bring any prior knowledge of Phil's unique educational situation to this text.

How does Phil resolve this problem in subsequent revisions? Rather than elaborate on this idea in order to clarify it, he eliminates it. It is one of several places in the text that he decides is irrelevant to the focus and purpose of his narrative and he deleates them.

In spite of these examples, this first draft does not have many examples of egocentricism. On the contrary, the introductory paragraph orients the reader to a controlling idea; the body of the paper narrates chronologically many of the pertinent events leading up to the tragedy, including a detailed scene with dialog; and there is a concluding paragraph.

Shaunessey points out another problem related to the writer's egocentricism, namely that basic writers appear unable to move back and forth between concrete and abstract statements. Therefore, their "papers tend to contain <u>either</u> cases or generalizations but not both" (240).

In Phil's first draft, although he does shift back and forth from specifics to generalizations, problems still exist in the text. As the first draft stands, the reader feels a disjuncture, an incongruity bordering on insensitivity, between the first person narrator's preoccupation with such matters as the "sweet icing and the hot cooked dough" of the donuts and the mouth watering aroma

of the pizza, in the light of the fact that the reader has been told that the narrator's mother is likely to be having a miscarriage.

Yet there is evidence throughout the body of the piece and through the selection of details that the writer's intention is not to suggest the narrator's insensitivity. His intention, which I believe he accomplishes more successfully in later drafts, is to contrast the irony of mundane, even happy moments, such as eating donuts and pizza, with the intrusion of life-shattering events, events that culminate in the mother's unexpected and unjust--at least from the narrator's point of view--miscarrage.

The problem becomes, at least in part, one of focus. Both the introduction and the conclusion of the first draft present the miscarriage as the mother's loss. In fact, the first few drafts are titled , "Mother's Loss." But as he revises, Phil discovers that it not only the mother's tragedy. The first draft suggests that this event has deeply affected the narrator, who feels helpless and angry, as well as the rest of the family. During the process of rewriting, Phil clarifies the focus of the essay in order to make his original purpose more available to the reader.

Shaunessey says that basic writing students have difficulty "explicitly marking the logical and rhetorical relationships between sentences, paragraphs, and larger units of composition" (240). Although Phil's first draft

contains sentences and paragraphs that for the most part mark these relationships, he does confront an organizational problem during his efforts to tell his story effectively.

The difficulties relating to organization directly relate to the nature of the essay's introduction. Not only does it, as already mentioned, focus too narrowly on the mother, but it at the same time provides too much information.

When Phil learns from the telephone conversation with his pregnant mother that she isn't feeling well and is still bleeding, there is no suspense because the reader has known since the second sentence that the mother will suffer a miscarriage. Although Phil appears to have recognized the potential for suspense in the first draft by narrating the unfolding events chronologically throughout the essay, he has already sabotaged any possibility of keeping the reader in suspense by using the typical rhetorical strategy of presenting the thesis idea--or what he believes is the thesis idea--in his introduction. This is a narrative, however, and by giving away too much of the story, he leaves the reader little to be curious about, thus seriously imparing the reader's incentive.

In his second and subsequent drafts, Phil attempts to rectify this problem, by putting the drive to the hospital "on stage" in the introduction. While this sets up the necessary conditions for suspense, the technique creates new

rhetorical problems for him. He can no longer simply recount events in their pure chronological order. In subsequent drafts he addresses the problem of successfully narrating the events of his story, since the initial flashback has upset the chronological order. After experimenting with, as Phil puts it, "a flashback within a flashback within a flashback," he eventually settles on using only the first flashback, a simpler and more effective narrative technique for telling his story.

The writing problems and strategies of Phil represent a mixture of features of both the basic college writer and the gifted child writer. While Phil is a unique individual, the stylistic dissonance revealed in the multiple drafts of this text is not unique to him. Similar phenomenon are present in other gifted child writers. As I hope this case study shows, identifying and working with gifted child writers presents special pedagogical problems. While teaching a gifted child writer does not require vastly different instructional strategies than responding to older writers at similar developmental levels, it may call upon skills that elementary language arts teachers are not normally expected to employ. Recognizing gifted child writers is an important first step toward providing them with the level of writing guidance that their talents demand.

Appendix A

Our Family's Loss

Final Draft

Dad was hurrying to the hospital. He was driving faster than he usually does. On the way to the hospital he was saying, "I guess your mother is going to lose the baby." I didn't respond. I couldn't believe this could happen to our family.

In the last few weeks the whole family had become excited. Mom was pregnant and was going to have a baby. One day, though, mom began spotting. My mom and dad were very worried. When a woman is pregnant, she's never suppose to bleed. Mom told me that she'd had a miscarriage years ago. She also said that it began with just spotting. It had become worse and worse and she'd lost the baby.

It started as a normal Wednesday afternoon. Dad picked me up as usual after school at 2:30PM. We started off to have what we believed would be a fun time. We first went to a rundown Food for Less supermarket. Dad gave me some change to call mom from a pay telephone in front. Dad told me to tell mom to order a large pizza from Pizza Hut. We would pick it up on the way home. While I was on the phone talking to mom, dad was withdrawing some money from the bank to pay for the pizza. I asked how she was doing. She responded with an answer I didn't want to hear. She said she didn't feel good and that she was still bleeding, now even more. I was worried. I went back to the car and told dad the news. I could tell that he was worried also.

On the way to get the pizza we were caught in five o'clock traffic. We stopped at a "Krispy Kreme" doughnut shop and bought a dozen hot doughnuts. We were hungry and could hardly wait to taste the sweet icing and the hot cooked dough. Finally we arrived at the restaurant. Dad told me to hurry and pick up the pizza so we could go home. I then went right to the check-out counter. I told the teenager behind the counter that I came to pick up Richard Johnston's pizza. "Where is your dad?," the manager asked.

I said, "He is outside in the yellow car parked over there." I pointed toward the parking lot. "Why?" I asked. "I need to talk to him," the manager said. He then walked in a sudden rush to our car.

"Mr. Johnston, I received a call from your wife asking me to tell you that she was being taken to the emergency room at University Medical Center," he said sympathetically. "I guess you don't want to get your pizza, huh?" he asked.

"I will go ahead and get the pizza since I'm right here," my dad answered. I then went into the restaurant once more and he gave me the pizza. The manager whispered something in the teenager's ear as he was cashing up my

receipt. I heard the manager say to make us pay only half price on the pizza. I hurried out to the car with it. The aroma made my mouth water. I couldn't wait to take a bite of it.

We finally arrived at the hospital. It was very terrifying. I had seen people die in a hospital. I didn't want to see my mom die. Dad told me to wait in the car and eat some of the pizza we'd just bought for dinner, if I wanted it. But I'd lost my appetite. Minutes went by slowly, then dad came out of the hospital with my little brother, Matthew. Dad said that mom hadn't been seen by the doctors yet. I was angry that my mother had not received top quality attention. Matthew stayed with me in the car and we continued to wait. Neither one of us could eat.

Hours went by as my brother and I waited to see what would happen. The friend that had brought my mom to the hospital had left. Dad came out and waited in the car with us for about half an hour. He then went back to the emergency room to check on mom. I felt helpless. Could I do anything? We waited hour after hour. Dad came back with a saddened face.

He said, "The doctors are going to perform a D and C on your momma."

"What's that, dad?," I asked.

"It's an abortion. Your mom lost the baby. They are going to take it out," my dad said.

I was completely stunned when I heard this news. The doctors did the abortion at 10:00PM. Dad went back in the hospital one last time. One and a half hours passed and then Matthew and I saw our mom and dad coming out of the hospital. I noticed that the little lump that was near her stomach was gone.

We went home after our evening at the hospital was over. On the way, I heard mom talking to dad, "I am going to try one last time for a baby. If I lose it, I will not try for another one because it is not worth it to put my body physically and emotionally through another miscarriage." The entire family had really felt a loss. Our family, of course, still goes on with daily life, but we will always remember this tragedy.

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